

VISUAL



ARTS

VERSATILE VIRTUOSO

by robert l. pincus, art critic

A person, pictured in profile, appears as if he's hesitant about being in the large canvas he occupies. Put yourself in his shoes and you won't blame him for being cautious.

The painting in which he exists, one of the large works in Oliver Jackson's terrific exhibition at the Porter Troupe Gallery, is a world in tumultuous flux. Paint cuts a path across its center, in oranges, blues and blacks, as if it were powerfully flowing water or fast-changing clouds.

Jackson doesn't literally paint clouds or water in this canvas, called "Untitled (7.6.96)." Here, as is often

ART REVIEW

"Oliver Jackson: Paintings, Sculpture, Works on Paper, 1978-1996"

Through May 31, Porter Troupe Gallery, 301 Spruce St., San Diego. 291-9096.

In some instances, they appear separate from their universe. In others, it's hard to tell where a figure ends and his (or her) surroundings begin. Jackson is peerless in his ability to make a figure and his world seamless. The current show, descriptively titled "Oliver Jackson: Paintings, Sculpture, Works on Paper, 1978-1996," is a good introduction to this ambitious artist. And if you're already a devotee, which it's hard not to be once you've seen his work, this show offers plenty of fresh, vital sights.

his way, he implies the world and the forces of nature. Even his figures aren't meant to be seen as people, in all their specificity. Each is a kind of everyman in silhouette — they're "paint people," as Jackson puts it.



PORTER TROUPE GALLERY

The figures in Oliver Jackson's watercolors, such as "Untitled (8.22.89-I)," are ethereal, some human and some phantoms.

If you're not ardent about abstraction, Jackson's paintings may win you over yet. The glorious spray of color in "Untitled (8.21.87)" does what so many of his canvases do: suggests nature in all its vitality. A portion of the picture is akin to an immense bouquet of spring flowers.

The exuberant use of paint in his work makes one thing clear: Jackson is an expressionist. In the '80s, he was viewed as a neo-expressionist, as that loose-knit movement was the rage at the time. But the label didn't really fit the artist. It's more accurate and revealing to ally him with the earlier abstract expressionists, particularly Willem de Kooning and Philip Guston.

J a c k s o n ' s w o r k s t e e m w i t h v i b r a n t l i f e

(Like Jackson's art, theirs segues gracefully into image-making.)

Yet a style never goes out of style when the right artist adopts it. Employing abstract expressionism as his springboard, Jackson has propelled himself through the decades with admirable force.

You get the feeling he wanted to conceal his fluent ability to handle paint, in work of the late '70s, as a way to free up the look of his pictures. He lays down the pigment in short flurries in "Untitled (4.78 - I)." Figures are simply suggestive blobs. The controlled crudeness of style is offset, though, by the carefully honed structure of the painting. The motif of people gathered in a circle — a motif that Jackson would employ repeatedly — anchors this painting.

By the mid-'80s, he had become uninhibited about displaying his technical prowess in oils. But there are paintings where his virtuosity gets the best of him. There are just too many twists and sweeps of paint, turning in on one another, in "Untitled (5.21.95)"; the density is suffocating.

As a watercolorist, Jackson is marvelous too. He uses the open space of a paper surface much the way he uses white in "Untitled (7.6.96)": to create a sense of infinite space. And the figures in his watercolors are powerfully symbolic, too. The male form in the left portion of "Untitled (8.22.89-I),"

hat atop his head, looks as if he's made of liquid more than flesh. He appears to occupy land, while the phantom form to the right is subterranean. A crouching figure hunkers down in an area also connoting clouds.

Jackson may be more painter than sculptor, but he creates memorable objects. Back in 1978, he crafted a pair of lovely, powerful sculptures. Each is made from a tall, slender slice of metal. One is male; the other, female. Each is wider at the top, allowing for Jackson to fashion the surface into a stately face. The narrowing form of each sculpture becomes the body, with breasts and a belly protruding gently from the female form. His male icon displays a barely discernible relief form of genitalia.

1996 was also a very good year for Jackson as sculptor. He made a knock-your-socks-off male figure — untitled, like everything else in his oeuvre. This one is an imposing figure: his body a kind of carved slab, his face a flat surface with a circular mouth and eyes defined by small metal discards, and his legs one long pole resting on the floor. (You can read this pole as phallus, too.)

Jackson can draw life studies that are as good as anyone might wish to see and a few of these pleasing compositions are included in this show. But his ambition to find a distinct vision of painting pushed him beyond tradition, and we are most fortunate that it did.